

Resurrected Peace

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Romans 14:13-21

Our Scripture reading comes from Romans, chapter 14, this morning; which you can find on page _____ of your pew bible. In the New Testament, once we've flipped past the gospels and the book of Acts we come to the first letter, or epistle, in the New Testament, called Romans; and it is ordered first among the letters in the New Testament because it is Paul's longest. When the books of the Bible were collected and made into a whole, they were ordered in certain ways. Paul's letters were organized according to their length with the longest coming first.

Now, Paul's letter to the Romans is also one of the most famous in the New Testament, though not because of its length. Romans is filled with pages of rich theology. However, our passage this morning is less about abstract theological concepts and more about practical problems confronting and conflicting the church at Rome. So let us read together, following along with our hearts and minds:

Romans 14: 13-22a (reading an extra verse)

Let us pray: “God of Peace, open our hearts and minds this morning to Your truth, and touch us so that we might live in the light You shine before us—and now guide my words and the meditations of our hearts that they might be pleasing unto you. Amen.”

I loved playing T-ball as child. And I suspect I might like watching it even more as an adult. You never know what's going to happen when a 6 year old steps up to bat. At that age, the rules are still emerging. And I remember a T-ball team-mate,

Daniel, who was the most unpredictable of all our players. He did not like to get in the middle of things, the kind of guy who avoided the conflict of the game, often times running away from the ball. One game, Daniel stepped up to bat and surprised us all with a gigantic swing that smacked the ball into the outfield. He ran as fast as he could to first base, rounded it and headed for second. But on second base there stood a defensive player, waiting to receive the throw from the infielder. Afraid to tag the base with someone standing on it, Daniel looped around and headed for third, but there, to his dismay, was another defender standing on the base. So, with the creativity of a 6 year old, Daniel went into orbit around third base, circling, waiting for the defender to move. Eventually the ball made its way, throw by throw, over to third base, and the shortstop chased Daniel down... after about three more orbits, of course. Yes, Daniel did not want to get in the middle of things, and he even created his own orbit to avoid the conflicts of base running.

Paul knew a thing or two about conflict, in fact Paul was saddled with a lot of conflict. His personal conflicts with authorities and religious leaders led to imprisonment, injury, and taunting. But if that wasn't enough, he was also caught up in conflicts on a different level: church disputes. In Corinth, and Galatia, Paul had to deal with conflict, division, and discord. And Rome was no different.

The conflict in Rome was about eating certain foods, foods that some thought were okay to eat while others did not. In Paul's time, foods had religious and cultural values, not just nutritional value. Jewish dietary laws were often influencing these kinds of conflicts in churches. The division and conflict in Rome was causing such unrest that Paul had to remind everyone "For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Paul tells the Romans, “this whole food business is silly—just keep it between yourself and God.” It's almost like Paul is saying “C'mon, let it go, can't we all just get along?” And we might find ourselves agreeing... we might find ourselves wishing the same thing for our lives today, “can't we all just get along?”

I think St. Paul is right that the Kingdom of God is about Peace, that we are to live our lives chasing after peace, doing what leads to peace (v.19). I think St. Paul might remind us today that conflict for the sake of conflict, or eating meat without regard for others, all this is destructive and an affront to faith in Jesus Christ.

But Paul's call for Peace cannot mean that Peace is merely the absence of tension, the absence of conflict. We should not take Paul's words to mean that in *all* disagreements, whenever problems arise, that we should merely keep these things between ourselves and God (v. 22). The danger with our passage this morning is that we might try and deduce a principle of action from it and then apply it universally to all circumstances—as if God just wants us to be quiet at all times and simply take whatever comes our way. Too many people have endured abuse, neglect, and tremendous pain in order to keep everything peaceful, stable, in place. Many of us this morning might be willing to go to great lengths to avoid disorder, unrest, chaos, and keep only a “shallow” peace. And we might even create our own orbits.

Our scripture opens up a live question for us this morning: What is true Peace? If we agree with Paul this morning that we should do what leads to Peace (v.19), then what might that mean?

In January of 1963, 8 clergymen, well-intentioned religious leaders, published an open letter calling on the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to hold off on civil disobedience—it was too turbulent a strategy, it created unrest—and so they called on King to let the courts take care of civil rights peacefully. They called for King to “wait” peacefully and make no more trouble. King responded to this call with his own open letter, written from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama:

I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not... the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice...who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advised the Negro to wait until a “more convenient season.”

For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity.... I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society... when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy”... when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that when they fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension of the South is merely a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, where the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substance-filled positive peace, where all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality.”

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Rev. King reminds us that Peace without justice is empty. True peace includes justice—where all people are respected and affirmed for their dignity and worth. But getting to justice, that might require conflict—the conflict of disrupting the *status quo*, of overturning the present order, of seeking a truer, more inclusive, more rich and beautiful Peace. This conflict may require us to ground the orbits we've made for ourselves and face the conflicted reality before us with heavy hearts.

But this is not new. As Christians we know the story of negative peace, the damage and destruction it created. For it was “peace” which justified executing criminals for the sake of Roman Imperial order. Violence and fear was the way of order. “Order” was the way of peace, “Pax Romana.” Yes, it was negative peace which justified capturing a poor peasant born to a carpenter from Nazareth. It was negative peace which motivated religious leaders to scheme against him. It was negative Peace which mocked him, beat him, and hung this man from a cross. Negative peace swallowed the man Jesus Christ, so that life could remain the same.

But God did not intend for life to remain the same. God did not intend for our hearts to be only heavy when looking at our conflicted world. Negative peace would not win the day. Peace without Justice is empty. And since God's justice stood in and with Jesus Christ, the negative Peace which crucified him could not keep him in the grave, it was overcome, and true Peace emerged. Yes, by God's grace, Peace was not left empty, the tomb was. <PAUSE> True Peace rose from the ashes of negative peace to bring us the eternal hope and unquenchable joy of life with God. This is the ever-lasting promise of true Peace—the one Rev. King knew so well. Peace, for Rev. King, brought before a road of conflict, but not just for the sake of conflict and discord. Rev. King reckoned with Paul's words: “Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.” (v.19)

God does not want us all merely to “get along,” as if simply getting by without conflict is the stuff of God's Kingdom. As Paul reminds us, God's Kingdom is about Peace. And true Peace is where life is abundant for all, a reality which Sin rails against. But true Peace is a reality, nonetheless, secured in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the Advent Peace we celebrate, the Peace which can fill our hearts this season. And so let us join together with the shepherds and hear the blessed music of angels as they sing of our cherished new-born Savior: “Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth, goodwill toward all!” *Amen.*